

*I'm too **5exi** for my shirt,
so **5exi** it hurts...*



totalkitcar was one of the first magazines to feature the Marlin 5exi and development has continued since we drove that early prototype. A hood is now available and a new version with doors is set to take it into a wider market, so it seemed a good time to drive their current demonstrator and see how it measures up in the ultra-competitive mid-engined sportscar marketplace. Words and pictures: MARTIN FOSTER

If you already drive a kitcar – or any other type of car outside of the clonemobile mainstream – you will be familiar with ‘The Instant Crowd Phenomena’. Park it anywhere and a crowd soon gathers; some just looking, the bolder ones asking questions, which usually include (depending on the vehicle) ‘What it is?’, ‘What’s it cost?’ and ‘How fast is it?’

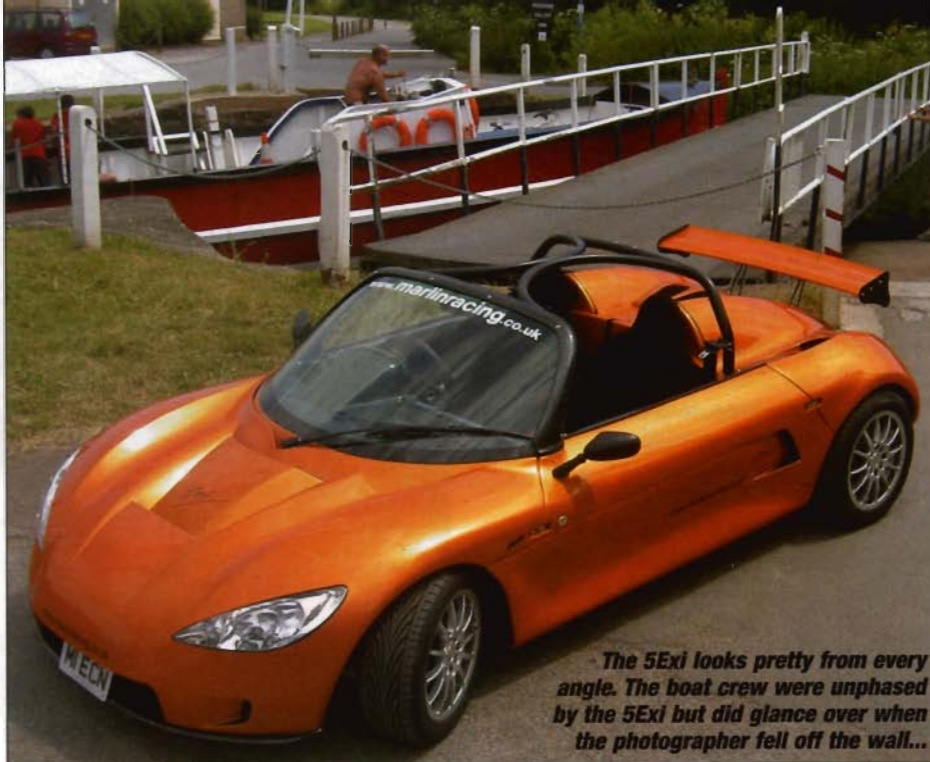
If you’re the shy and retiring type, you might find it a bit embarrassing – or even annoying, but then if you don’t want that sort of attention maybe you should buy a Mondeo – or perhaps it’s just the sort of ice-breaker you need to meet new people. Call it car therapy. Maybe you could get it on the National Health Service?

For journalists, it serves as a useful barometer of public reaction, a sort of instant guide to how the car is perceived by those who have never seen one before.

Marlin can confidently list ‘Power of Attraction’ among the stats for their 5exi – it draws the crowds so easily, it would make ideal transport for the Pied Piper. And after being told what it is, who makes it, what it costs and yes, how fast it goes, etc, etc (I’m very patient), the most common reaction was utter disbelief that it wasn’t a production car.

Evoking such positive reactions from the ignorant (of kitcars, at least) masses is partly down to the high standard of finish of the car tested – its super-deep metallic orange paint, a set of nice, but again quite subtle, alloy wheels and a tidy cockpit with colour-coded, Marlin-logo’d dials and Rover switchgear would make the 5exi a striking centrepiece for any production car showroom.

But as kitcar people know, high quality kitcars go deeper than that. It’s basic design that makes a car look and work right, and the 5exi is a mobile masterclass in such details. The body styling is crisp and modern, but it’s the details that bring it to life – like those



The 5Exi looks pretty from every angle. The boat crew were unphased by the 5Exi but did glance over when the photographer fell off the wall...



The cockpit is just the way it should be – simple and effective. Note colour-coded guagery, cutaways in seat bases to provide stepping point, side storage pods and exposed cross-bracing.



Neat rear-end features adjustable spoiler – probably not that effective as an aerodynamic aid, but it looks so cool.

perfectly sourced Peugeot 206 headlamps, the single wiper, the Lotus Elise screen and now, the neat hood.

A hood is always going to look like an after-thought on a true sportscar because it is – the 5exi, like all true sportscars, is designed to be seen and driven without one. But the British climate often has other ideas, as we know, so a hood is a necessary evil, and Marlin have come up with one that actually looks quite cute but which, more importantly, works. It’s a one-piece, throw-over design, so it’s easy to stash and fit, but it also includes neat little touches like sidescreens (doubling as doors on the current non-door version), which unzip diagonally across the roof area, allowing easier access. Plus there’s an even neater little device that you strap to the rollcage (which supports the hood, so no fiddly bits of framework) and inflates with a small handpump to take out any sagginess. How clever is that? Clever enough for it to be patented in fact.

Getting into low sportscars, with or without doors, is always tricky because you really need to put a foot on the seat when you step in. The 5exi, though, features seats with a cutaway between your legs to provide a stepping point. Works superbly and another first for Marlin, as far as we are aware.

So the Marlin 5exi looks the part and it’s got more neat tricks than an evening at home with Derren Brown, but sometime you’ve got to wrench yourself away from that crowd of gushy admirers and take to the road – does it cut the Colman’s there too?

In a word, yes. But then you’re probably looking for a little more detail and I need to justify a whole day of serious swanning, so here’s how and why.

The 5exi can be fitted with a whole

range of engines, from the economical Rover 1.1-litre, that should insure you are quoted happy, up to the Honda Tyre R, that will probably give your insurance agent a panic attack but will ensure you a smile wider than The Joker watching The Office.

The car I tested ran a 140bhp version of the Rover K Series and felt responsive and revvy, easily providing enough power for some serious fun on the twisty Devon roads, and it hummed along painlessly on long-legged motorway sections. It was amazingly flexible too, pulling away from little more than tickover in fourth when I got lazy in heavy traffic.

Mid-engined cars using units from front-engined production models mean manufacturers have to fabricate their own gear linkages and the 5exi's is faultless – notchy and precise to the point that, as should be the case, you just don't notice after even a few miles.



Front suspension, fuel tank and radiator – go on, fault it.

The handling and ride characteristics of a light, mid-engined sports car take a little longer to adjust to. The 5exi is a real driver's car, providing direct and immediate feedback of the car's every move, through the quick steering rack, from the sound of the engine, and through what used to be called 'the seat of your pants' – it all adds up to a sense of being part of the car, rather than just sitting in it. Again, that's what sports cars should do.

The highly sensitive nature of lightweight sports cars also means that even minor alterations to tyre pressure, spring rates and damper settings can make an enormous difference to their ride and handling characteristics. The Marlin demonstrator was, quite sensibly, set-up for compromise – a surprisingly comfortable ride for such a light car, but



Simple, one-piece design is held by usual press-studs. Note neat window between rear pods.

with a corresponding loss of feedback at higher speeds on some of Devon's undulating (oh, all right, crap) roads. Fine for everyday, fast A-B motoring, but a little too soft to make the most of the car's true capabilities.

Some manufacturers might have met my comments with a 'that's-the-way-it-is-so-tough' kind of shrug (and others have), but Mark at Marlin suggested I try it again after a click or two of the adjustable dampers. I did, and the difference was remarkable – a less smooth ride, for sure, but with even more feedback for the serious driver.

I covered several hundred miles in the 5exi and felt completely comfortable and confident with it – although the transition back to the vague and slightly removed sensation of driving a conventional production car was a far less enjoyable experience.

But wait a moment. It can't be that good, can it?

Well, the 5exi IS a small, mid-engined small-production, low-budget sports car and that brings with it a few inherent problems. Even with the trick hood, access isn't easy when it's up (although the new doors will help that immensely), there's not much luggage space, the

engine noise is ever-present (not helped by the intakes just behind your head), and when you do drive it hard (and it's SO difficult not to), you do need to actively drive it because it's so responsive. But it IS a small, mid-engined small-production, low-budget sports car. That's what they do.

The 5exi undoubtedly looks the part and in practical terms it seems to have struck a near-perfect balance between driver response and daily usability – with enough adjustment in the system (damper settings and tyre pressures) to allow every owner to find their ideal drive. And it comes from a company that has earned itself a deserved reputation for attention to detail, after-sales support and value for money (you can build a 5exi for around £8000, but allow a few grand more to make it really something special).

So you could buy something more comfortable, more forgiving, more practical. Something really sensible. But then you won't experience the joys of real sports car driving. And you'll never experience The Instant Crowd Phenomena.

Marlin Cars, Mill Street, Crediton.

Devon EX17 1EZ.

Tel: 01363 773772.

Website: www.marlincars.co.uk.



Curved rollcage top tubes make access easier and add to curved lines.